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AUTHOR Pewewardy, Cornel D.
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ABSTRACT

"Indian" mascots of athletic teams can be offensive to Native Americans when they portray negative and stereotypical images. The notion of the "tomahawk chop" invented by Atlanta Braves fans and all the antics that go along with such images prevent millions of Americans from understanding the authentic Indian America, both long ago and today. "Playing Indian," a common sight on many athletic fields in America, mocks Native American cultural practices, trivializes their diversity, and assaults their humanity. Indian dress, weapons, artifacts, and music that have religious or cultural significance to many traditional Native American people have been distorted and degraded, and Native peoples have been portrayed as a fictitious generic image or as the stereotypical hostile warrior or princess. Thirteen questions are presented to assist educators in addressing the issues surrounding the Native American mascot of school athletic teams and cultural respect. (SV)

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The "Tomahawk Chop": The Continuous Struggle of Unlearning "Indian" Stereotypes

by

Cornel D. Pewewardy, D.Ed.
Principal
Mounds Park All-Nations Magnet School
1075 E. 3rd Street
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55106

(612) 293-5938

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by Cornel Pewewardy

Why all the hoopla brought on by the "tomahawk chop" invented by the Atlanta Braves baseball fans? Speaking from an Native American worldview, the issue becomes one of major concern because these trappings and symbols resulting from them offends tens of thousands of Native Americans. The notion of the "tomahawk chop" and all the attics that go along with these invented images prevent millions of Americans from understanding the authentic Indian America, both long ago and today. Moreover, these invented images leave emotional and psychological scars in those parents and students involved in the continuous struggle of unlearning Indian stereotypes.

Many Native Americans continue to be proud of Indian mascots of athletic teams. The concern takes place when Indian mascots are portrayed in offensive, negative images. Most mascots and/or imagery of Native Americans that have been challenged by special interest groups, have either cleaned up or changed the name or figure of the Indian mascot. There is no one generic Indian tribe in this country. About 500 Indian tribes and bands were identified according to the 1980 census.

Indian mascot debates have been so controversial that the issues have sometimes split many tribal communities throughout the country. Young children see ethnic groups on television and in many dimensions of real life. Mascots wearing turkey feathers, painting themselves with so-called war paint, waving toy "tomahawks," composing hollywood chants, riding onto the playing field on horseback, and "playing Indian" are common sights on many athletic fields in America. Playing Indian mocks the Native American cultural practices, trivializes their diversity and assaults their humanity.

The non-Indian created "Indian" imagery consists of unauthentic representations of Native American peoples and cultures. Whether used for "cute," comical fanciful, decorative, or symbolic purposes, this "Indian" imagery degrades Native American people and cultures, and distorts non-Indian children's perceptions of Native Americans. This is especially true when school mascots are portrayed as negative images.

Societal changes have forced the renaming of some mascots and nicknames, particularly when mascots and nicknames became less popular in the eyes of minority and underrepresented groups. Many mascot sponsors have since "cleaned up" their Indian mascots and portrayed a more positive image.

If mascot sponsors and fans really understood the symbolism and meaning to Native American students of the ever-present feathers (headdress), weapons, shabby buckskin clothing, broken English shouting of mascots, would they still allow these figures to take to today's playing fields across the country? Flutes, whistles, weapons, and feathers still have high religious and cultural significance to many traditional Native American people. Mascot and nicknames disguise real people (human beings). Coloring faces with that resembles "war paint" or wearing buckskin, feathered characters keep the fictitious Native American image circulating on decals, pennants, and team-sports' clothing.

Even music has entered into the playing arena through school bands playing their versions of Native American themes. Generic and fictitious Native American music trivializes what many traditional people consider to be a spiritual entity. Drums, flutes and horns have been frequent instruments used in athletic events. Many of these drum beats and melodies, accompanied with so-called spirit chants are out of character on the playing fields. Native American instruments like the drum, flute and whistles and the music that comes from them

represent the whole universe. Still today, tribes think of this condition as the heartbeat of their songs and dances.

The following criteria is presented to assist educators toward addressing culturally responsible questions concerning the Native American mascot.

1. Does the mascot use culturally responsible (tribally-specific) languages to convey their message on the playing field?

2. Do mascot sponsors choreograph skits to please the audience regardless of "cute" nuances that may be psychological harmful to representative tribal groups? Are the skits written from an Native American worldview?

3. When matched with cheer leading squads, are Indian mascots characterized as fierce, ugly-looking (both in facial expression and dress) in relation to the other uniforms worn by the entire squad?

4. Are Indian mascot mannerisms and personalities polite and culturally respectful; rather than portraying a hostile character as demonstrated, as skewed, and as generalized passages most frequently seen in fictitious literature about Native Americans?

5. In skits about Native American history, are Indian mascots presented as "human beings" and an integral and contributing member of society and apart of the overall history of America? Indian mascots portrayed as animals takes away the human element of "being."

6. Are demonstrations about Indian mascots and nicknames in popular culture described in such a way as to preclude improper comparisons between past and present cultural standards? Words like "scalp" and "squaw" should be avoided, as these terms are externally imposed conceptualizations that imply incorrect and inaccurate cultural traits of Native American people.

7. Is the culture of the contemporary Indian mascot portrayed as a present-day, modern person contributing to society rather than a static image, not contributing and a burden upon society?

8. Do Indian mascots adequately and accurately describe the life and present situation of the Native American within the context of the tribe being portrayed?

9. Do Indian mascots portray culturally relevant music on the playing field? The so-called hollywood version of Indian music should be avoided at all cost.

10. Does wearing war paint at athletic events signify being tribally specific or does it just mean "playing Indian?"

11. When an Indian mascot comes riding in on a horse to the playing field (whether demonstrating strength by throwing down a lance), does this portray the real image of the Native American in which the mascot broadcast?

12. When bringing in so-called Indian artifacts into the playing field (tomahawk chop), do fans portray a culturally responsible behavior and demeanor; respecting Native American culture?

13. The popularity of the Indian "princess" image by non-Indians often times becomes distorted in identifying and tracing tribal ancestry. Do mascot sponsors try to match or link the princess image with other mascot figures?

Neglecting to mention tribally-specific names helps to perpetuate stereotypes notions of Native American people and thwarts understanding and appreciation of the complexities of diverse cultures. These tribes are integral aspects of human identity, not occupational titles. When playing "cowboys" and "Indians," there was a time when playing Indian was unpopular. A cowboy is an occupation, while to be "Indian" is a cultural identity. Thus, playing "Indian" encourages youngsters to believe that being Native American is nothing more than a playtime

activity--rather "being Indian" is a human condition.

Some remedies in Minnesota are taking place slowly through actions of special interest groups. In November 1992 the University of Minnesota athletic director, McKinley Boston, directed Gophers sports teams to avoid scheduling competition at home against school with American Indian nicknames. Boston said he initiated the memo because of an incident at the Minnesota-Illinois men's basketball game in January that stemmed from Indians' protests of the Fighting Illini nickname and Indian mascot during the game.

There are no simple answers to this issue, however, communication is the first step toward discussing the Indian mascot issue. One of the most critical elements to this issue is coming to a consensus among most people involved. To skirt the issue and not decide what to do eliminates the educational opportunity toward building a knowledge base in multicultural education. Accordingly, as we look forward to another world series and/or athletic event, we can also look forward to re-educating individuals about how to portray Native American mascots in a more culturally responsible method by emphasizing the importance of creating a healthy, positive attitude about people that helped to transform America, and the world; the Native American.

Dr. Cornel D. Pewewardy *is Principal of the Mounds Park All-Nations Magnet School in the St. Paul Minnesota Public Schools. He was named the 1991 "National Indian Educator of the Year" by the National Indian Education Association and 1991 Minnesota Transformational Leadership Award. Cornel is Comanche-Kiowa originally from Lawton, Oklahoma.*